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# Superheroes and social action: Reproduction, recurrence, and recognition in the superhero genre

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SUPERHEROES AND SOCIAL ACTION: REPRODUCTION, RECURRENCE, AND RECOGNITION IN THE  
SUPERHERO GENRE

For the degree of Master of Arts

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Approved by Major Professor(s): Josh Scacco and Ashley Kelly

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SUPERHEROES AND SOCIAL ACTION: REPRODUCTION, RECURRENCE, AND  
RECOGNITION IN THE SUPERHERO GENRE

A Thesis

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of

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by

Max M. Renner

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## ABSTRACT

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Rhetorical genre analysis examines genre as social action and is primarily concerned with the experiences of individual users (Miller, 1984). The genres that rhetorical genre scholarship takes up are typically functional genres or genres in which individuals have direct means of utilizing and modifying a genre. This focus on functional genres makes sense in terms of the tradition's interest in user experience and reciprocity. This project seeks to examine the potential implications rhetorical genre analysis has for vernacular genres which, for the most part, have remained the domain of literary scholarship due to their focus on structural, formal elements.

This project focuses on the superhero genre as a point of study in order to engage how users experience a vernacular genre. The superhero genre in particular is characterized by lack of direct access to genre reproduction for users, which is a point of interest for rhetorical genre analysis. In order to explore the potential theoretical implications of rhetorical genre analysis application to vernacular genres, there will be two guiding questions around which the project is oriented: (1) what rhetorical work does the

superhero genre perform? And (2) what can we say about rhetorical genre analysis of vernacular genres?



## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

*“Five-year-old Miles Scott - a.k.a. Batkid - lived out his wish of becoming a caped crusader Friday, quashing a crime spree in his pint-size superhero suit as San Francisco became Gotham City. Thousands of volunteers and spectators stopped what they were doing to take part. People cheered as Miles buzzed by in a Lamborghini Batmobile.... Even President Obama took a break from defending his health care law to say in an online video, ‘Way to go, Miles. Way to save Gotham.’” (Ho & Alexander, 2013).*

On the morning of November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* declared “Batkid Saves City” while more than 12,000 individuals volunteered to assist the Make-A-Wish Foundation in their largest project (Ho & Alexander, 2013). The project facilitated an evanescent transformation of San Francisco into Gotham City and offered a very public enactment of the superhero genre. Although not every participant had a singularly unified understanding of what a superhero is, this cultural enactment represented a mutually constituted understanding of the superhero genre as social action.

Scholars interested in comics have recently begun to take up the notion of the superhero as a genre, however, the primary orientation for scholars discussing the

superhero genre has been literary. Literary orientations to genre offer formal, structural understandings, but fail to account for the fixity and flexibility of genre demonstrated in the understanding of the thousands of volunteers at the Make-A-Wish Foundation's Batkid project. In contrast to literary orientations, a rhetorical perspective engages how individuals recognize and respond to situations through an understanding of genre. Miller defines rhetorical genre analysis as capturing "the rhetorical experience of the people who create and interpret the discourse" (Miller, 1994, p. 21). This potential of a rhetorical approach to genre remains untapped within the context of comic studies to date and this project argues for the need to incorporate such an approach to better understand the relationship between comic book users and the superhero genre. Engaging with this epistemological community explores the relational experience of this genre rather than privileging more formal, structural elements. The superhero genre presents a challenge for rhetorical understandings of genre as stable and changeable; the hierarchical, structured nature of reproduction in the superhero genre is uncharacteristic of the emphasis on user participation in reproduction for rhetorical genre analysis. In order to explore this challenge to rhetorical scholarship, two guiding questions are used to orient the project: (1) what rhetorical work does the superhero genre perform? And (2) what can we say about rhetorical genre analysis of vernacular genres?

In exploration of these guiding questions, this thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the literature by articulating the theoretical orientation to genre utilized for this project. Then, the review moves on to the industry context by continuing to offer a broad overview of the superhero genre within the comic book industry. The chapter then continues to explore scholarship already conducted surrounding the superhero genre.

Finally, this discussion then presents the potential theoretical implications for this application of rhetorical genre analysis to a vernacular genre in order to situate the purpose of the project's guiding questions.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approaches of the project. This chapter begins by describing the asynchronous method by which participants were recruited on Reddit. Then, the chapter moves on to describe the benefits of the collection of data via sub-reddits. Finally, I detail the theoretical thematic analysis of the data and explain the methods of coding: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984).

Chapter 4 details the findings of the project. Specifically, the chapter presents the three main themes present in the data. Chapter 5 continues the discussion of the findings, which is organized by revisiting the guiding questions of the project, specified in the introduction. Specifically, this section explores the theoretical implications of the guiding questions, by situating their purpose within the broader scholarship and detailing the contributions of the project to broader rhetorical scholarship. Limitations and future directions are also discussed. Finally, the section offers a concluding discussion to the project beginning with a brief reiteration of the overall purpose of the research. Then the conclusion identifies larger implications of the project for rhetorical genre theory, genre analysis of the superhero genre, and practice.

The research implications of the project are both theoretical and practical. In terms of theoretical implication, this research presents the potential benefit of engaging complex experiential knowledge of users through rhetorical genre analysis of vernacular genres. Additionally, the research into vernacular genres presents implications for how rhetorical work is constructed and conceptualized differently in vernacular genres due to

barriers to user participation in production. More practically, through an understanding of a genre's rhetorical work, the research allows insight into the motivations of the actions of communities engaged with vernacular texts.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Genre

In order to begin with a discussion of genre manageable for the context and scope of this project, I present the conceptual definition of genre this project works from, then continue to discuss how rhetorical genre analysis developed. For the purposes of this project, the conceptualization of genre follows Carolyn Miller's (1984) discussion of genre as social action; genre is taken to be a frame for understanding the social construction of contexts based on prior experience with the expectations associated with similarly recurring situations. An ability to recognize genre is, in essence, an ability to recognize how contexts and situations are socially recognizable based on the repetition and management of expectations. This particular understanding of genre extends from the development of rhetorical genre analysis.

Despite Aristotle's early rhetorical rendition of genre mirroring taxonomic classification, the "rhetorical situation" shaped this developmental conceptualization of rhetorical genre analysis. Bitzer (1968) argued that rhetorical situations occur independent of individuals; rhetorical discourse occurs in response to a perceived rhetorical situation. There are situations that exist in the world and individuals can respond to an exigence and enact some discourse; this discourse could then result in a change. For Bitzer, in a given situation the potential change must be possible through human interaction. The potential for change characterizes a rhetorical exigence.

Bitzer states that “a speech will be rhetorical when it is a response to the kind of situation which is rhetorical” (p. 10). For him, the situation is the precursor for potential discourse.

The notion of the rhetorical situation advanced by Bitzer has been contested by a variety of scholars (Vatz, 1973; Consigny, 1974; Miller, 1992). The importance of *situation* and *action* both play important roles in conceptualizing the rhetorical situation and the development of rhetorical genre analysis (Bawarshi, & Reiff, 2010, p. 69). Miller (1994) reframes the rhetorical situation as a social construct; she states “before we can act, we must interpret the indeterminate material environment” (p. 25). There are not inherently existing exigences upon which we as individuals can act without first understanding our situation, our context; the situational constraints, how we understand or define situations, shape the ways in which individuals respond. Exigence is likewise, socially constructed (Bawarshi, & Reiff, 2010, 70), as “a form of social knowledge” (Miller, 1994, p. 26). Miller continues to elaborate that “exigence provides the rhetor with a socially recognizable way to make his or her intentions known. It provides an occasion, and thus a form, for making public our private versions of things” (Miller, 1994, p. 26). Her reconceptualization of exigence is embedded in the social; we experience and respond to a potential exigence, within a situation, based on learned social understandings. Although this is a key debate in rhetorical studies, for the purposes of this project I align myself with the conceptualization presented by Carolyn Miller

Miller’s renditions of the rhetorical situation and exigence as social constructions inform her seminal essay in rhetorical genre analysis, *Genre as Social Action*, in which she discusses her understanding of “genre as social action” or as “typified rhetorical

actions based in recurrent situations” (Miller, 1984, p. 159). Situations in this context, are entered into by individuals who must attempt to understand the situation in reference to previous situations that have occurred. The recurrence of situations, originally discussed by Bitzer (1968), have power by prompting “fitting responses” which become typified (p. 6). Although the recurrence of situations may place constraints on responses or actions of individuals due to typified expectations in response, a knowledge of genre is what allows individuals to recognize both the situation and the typified actions expected in situations.

In this way, the ability to recognize an exigence is a learned process bound with learning genre; generic knowledge allows individuals to make sense of recurrent situations and participate in reproducing genre. Through this recognition of situation and understanding of expected actions, individuals can participate or respond to the expectations of the exigence. Schryer (1993) describes genre as “stabilized-for-now” and although genres are characterized by this recurrent stability, genres are changeable (p. 204). Amy Devitt (2004) argues that genre change is characterized by flexibility and changeability; genres must be flexible in order to function in rhetorical situations, since each rhetorical situation is unique, as well as able to “adapt to changes in contexts and uses” (p. 90). In this way genres are simultaneously consistent in terms of recurrence and constantly developing. Miller and Sheperd (2009) explore this inherent tension between “centrifugal forces of change and the centripetal tendencies of recurrence and typification, stability and cultural reproduction” (p. 266).

The goal of this project is to offer an understanding of the superhero genre that engages how individuals socially experience the genre. In order to engage with that experience, this project uses rhetorical genre analysis as the framework for this project.

Following Miller's (1984) conceptual definition of genre as social action, I highlight five interrelated components of genre that are explored in this project. Specifically, these are all understood as aspects of genre as social action: *situation*, *recurrence*, *typification*, *situated cognition*, and *social reproduction*.

## 2.2 Genre and Comic Studies

The reception of superheroes in the comic book industry has undergone significant revision since the genre's inception. Action Comics #1 introduced the first modern representation of the superhero genre, from a literary tradition perspective, with Superman's 1938 debut (Uslan, 2013; Coogan, 2006). Despite the widespread popularity of superheroes today, the superhero genre was originally regarded as childish and a lower art form. Comics, particularly superhero comics, had a tarnished reputation because they were fantasy rather than improvement literature (Gaiman, & Ishiguro, 2015). Author Kazuo Ishiguro has commented about the historical ghettoization of genres characterized by fantasy, in a conversation with another well-known fantasy author Neil Gaiman. Ishiguro notes

Since industrial times began, it's sort of true to say that children have been allowed a sanctioned world where fantasy and imagination is deemed to be fine, in fact, almost desirable. But then when they get to a certain age, they have to start getting prepared to be units of the labour force. And so, society has to start getting the fantasy element out of the children.

(Gaiman, & Ishiguro, 2015)

Although these fantasy genres may have been acceptable for children historically, once individuals moved into adulthood, consumption of fantasy was no longer useful



insomuch as it did not contribute to production of capital or increase in social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). However, Ishiguro continues, noting that since we are no longer in an industrial era, fantasy genres are perceived as valuable beyond the scope of improvement literature; specifically, he comments on the necessity of creativity in many new technology industries. Similarly, the superhero genre, while once stigmatized, has grown to dominate comic books in current publications, both print and digital.

The ascendance of the superhero genre has allowed the two titan publishers of the comic book industry, DC and Marvel, to maintain an oligopoly of sorts through their promotion of the superhero genre (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 90). Where comic books used to have many genres, from horror to western or romance to superhero, the production of genres is predominantly focused on superheroes, of which DC and Marvel have the most successful history. For many, the industry has facilitated the synonymization of American comics with superhero comics.

The industry focus has in some ways served to further legitimize the superhero genre beyond the impact of changing market structures. Although superheroes are fantasy and exist within a comic narrative, the impact of the superhero genre has reached far beyond the bounds of their panels. The comic book industry generates over \$870 million per year from comic and graphic novel sales, yet much of the recent success has come from the adaptation of superheroes into film franchises (Lubin, 2014). Of the ten highest grossing films on record, three are superhero films produced since 2012, and each generated more than \$1.2 billion--Avengers, Avengers: Age of Ultron, and Iron Man 3.

Despite how the aforementioned conflation of superhero genre with comic books has impacted the success of the superhero genre, this project discusses the superhero

genre as a distinct genre separate from the broader medium of comic books. In order to continue with a discussion of the superhero genre, it is necessary to clarify the distinction between comic books and the superhero genre. Catherine Labio (2011) elucidates another important and related distinction. She argues that the adoption of the term “graphic novel” in academia to represent comics serves to sanitize and narrow the understanding of the term comics. This widespread use of the term graphic novel foregrounds a narrow, unrepresentative version of comics, while obfuscating both the historical diversity represented in comics and international depictions of comics. The distinction between superhero genre and comic books similarly requires explanation. The interchangeability of comic books and the superhero genre can be seen as a narrowing of the plurality of comics and an inaccurate representation of both the genre and industry.

### 2.3 Superheroes as Literary Genre

Greater attention to both comic studies and superheroes in American academia has mirrored the increasing prominence of superheroes in American culture. The topic of superheroes has proven engaging for a variety of disciplines, including history, cultural studies, philosophy, and communication. This interdisciplinary interest has prompted scholars to explore an array of topics, ranging from analyses of the historical evolution and significance of individual superheroes, to critical critiques of representation and sociopolitical conflicts, and even comics as philosophy (Brown, 2001; Darowski, 2014; Gray & Kaklamanidou, 2011; Lepore, 2014; Morris & Morris, 2005); yet the application of genre analysis has only recently been conducted.

Although the label of genre analysis has not been widely applied to research regarding superheroes, when it has been taken up, much of the scholarship has in fact

mirrored a literary focus on structural elements of the superhero genre. Where rhetorical conceptualizations of genre are engaged with social action and the creation of social meaning, a literary approach to genre engages the typified outcomes of genre.

Literary approaches to genre emphasize the formal, structural elements of genre, rather than the experience of user participation in making sense of genre and creation of generic typifications; the traditions differ in the conceptualization of what constitutes genre. Literary genre analysis stemmed from the Aristotelian tradition of classification, and has often been noted for focusing on classifications of formal rather than pragmatic elements (Miller, 1984, p. 154). The literary orientation understands meaning of genre theory as being constructed and maintained within texts, specifically within structural elements of texts in a given context. However, in spite of a focus on formal elements, the complexity of genres is integral to literary studies of genre.

Focus on genre as a structural characteristic, has unknowingly been the dominant frame for explorations regarding genre in comics studies. Historians, for example, have explored the development of both the medium and superhero genre at length (Darowski, 2014; Madrid, 2009). Representation of minority characters, or lack thereof, in the medium has been taken to task by Darowski (2014) in his examination of the evolution of minority representation in the Uncanny X-Men. Madrid (2009), more broadly, presents a cultural historical evaluation of superheroines in comics. Both of these authors explore the historical development of characters in the superhero genre.

Apart from interest in characters, scholars have examined the formal development of the comic book industry and the superhero genre. Different examinations of American comics' development have been engaged from a variety of lenses. Wandtke (2012)

highlights the stylistic development of the superhero genre as an extension of traditional oral storytelling. Although Wandtke does not label his discussion as such, he is addressing oral storytelling an example of an antecedent genre (Jamieson, 1975). Amy Nyberg's book *Seal of Approval: The Origins and History of the Comics Code* (1998) discusses the implications of the self-regulatory agency, the Comics Code Authority that the industry created in order to stave off criticism in the 1950's. Nyberg's book focuses on the impact the Comics code authority had on the lack of legitimacy, of both comic books and the superhero genre. She emphasizes that the censorship in comic books of controversial topics under the Comics Code left a legacy reifying the notion of comic books as a medium for children.

Previous scholarship may not overtly claim genre analysis; however, there has been some attention to comics specifically addressing the topic of genre. Scholars have conducted analyses of typified trends in non-mainstream comics, and they have detailed the origins within different comic genres (Benton, 1992; Hatfield, 2005). Benton's (1992) five volumes each detailed the development and structural elements of a different genre of comic book. His discussion in his fourth volume however was not focused on the superhero genre, but rather on the Golden Age superhero genre. A more contemporary discussion of the superhero genre has come from Peter Coogan's work *Superhero: The secret origins of a genre*. Similar to Wandtke's discussion of oral storytelling, Coogan (2013) traces antecedent genre by exploring the "primordial roots" of the superhero genre as being entrenched in mythological heroes (p. 116). He also identifies "three elements — mission, powers, and identity," which he says "establish the core of the genre" and constitute a superhero (Coogan, 2013, p. 7).

Peter Coogan's (2013) work represents the most overt contemporary discussion of the superhero genre through a literary lens. Coogan identifies specific conventions which he argues mark the superhero and subsequently the genre. He first develops his discussion of the genre through a comparison of the first two superheroes. Although Superman may have been the "first character to fully embody the definition of the superhero and to prompt the imitation and repetition necessary for a genre to emerge," this inauguration for the conventions of the superhero did not indicate the concretization of rigid genre conventions (p. 175). Superman may have introduced these conventions, but it was the introduction of Batman which expanded and complicated the concept. Batman certainly looked like a superhero, with his costume and cape, and had a secret identity. Although he did not have any superpowers, some have argued that his humanity was his superpower (Uslan, 2013). Regardless of that debate, Batman's introduction challenged the conventions which Superman had previously developed. His existence leveled a challenge against Superman's rendition of a superhero, which helped to crystallize the flexibility of genre conventions rather than a definition of a superhero. This "apparent indeterminacy originates in the nature of the genre. No one example within a genre displays every convention of its genre, but all examples from a genre share common elements that form... what can best be thought of as 'family resemblances'" (Coogan, 2013, pp. 7). It is the indeterminacy that has helped to expand these integral conventions of the superhero genre; each rendition of a superhero abides by these conventions in varying, diverse ways. Although Coogan is emphasizing the importance of these three elements, the indeterminacy mirrors the notion of flexibility discussed in rhetorical conceptualizations of genre.

The aforementioned scholarship is in keeping with literary genre analysis and maintains attention to formal, structural elements as definitive of meaning. The emphasis on structural elements as descriptive of the superhero genre reflects the literary approach of the research previously noted: the development of structural characteristics such as characters (Darowski, 2014; Madrid, 2009), focus on historical context of the genre development (Nyberg, 1998), evolution in stylistic developments of the genre (Wandtke, 2012), and the explanation of conventions which mark the genre (Coogan, 2013).

Although these literary genre analyses provide a descriptive framework for understanding different aspects of the superhero genre, the focus primarily either on structural elements of the genre or development of antecedent genres inherently leaves absent the understanding of genre users and how genres are constructed socially. For example, Benton's (1992) analysis of the formal development of the Golden Age superhero genre provides clarity from an historical perspective, but does not explore user understandings of the genre. Similarly, Coogan's (2013) discussion of the superhero genre as defined by three conventions leaves absent the meaning of these conventions for users. Coogan's focus remains on engaging the meaning assumed to be inherent in the formal conventions of the genre, rather than interrogating the social creation of genre.

## 2.4 Rhetorical Genre

Scholarship surrounding the superhero continues to face an enigma of sorts; superheroes themselves are still rather ambiguous, despite the proliferation of scholarship surrounding these characters. Recently, psychologist Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan published a collection of essays attempting to uncover the answer to their titular question, *What is a Superhero?* (Rosenberg & Coogan, 2013). Rosenberg and Coogan

collected more than twenty-five essays from scholars endeavoring to define “superhero.” Rather than clarifying a definition, the collection is cacophonous in its deliberation of what constitutes a superhero. Of the essays, no cohesive definition or consensus is reached in terms of what makes a superhero. This plurality of superhero conceptualizations demonstrates the importance of an understanding of the superhero genre, specifically a rhetorical approach that engages genre as a relationship between a user and text (Frow, 2006; Miller, 1984).

As Miller has noted the rhetorical orientation is “ethnomethodological” in nature; it “seeks to explicate the knowledge that practice creates” and thereby focuses on how users experience genre (Miller 1984, p. 155). In order to operationalize a discussion of rhetorical genre in this project, I more specifically address each of the previously mentioned components: *situation*, *recurrence*, *typification*, *situated cognition*, *social reproduction*. As each of these components overlap and are inextricably interrelated, I discuss each in isolation, but in relation to one another.

Similar to the rhetorical situation, the situation in which an individual enters plays a key role in understanding genre. Each *situation* an individual enters into will simultaneously be similar and unique. What I mean by this is, first, situations recur and second, no two situations will be identical; because of that similarity and uniqueness, understanding each new situation is often aided by an understanding of genre. For example, if you were visiting San Francisco on November 15<sup>th</sup> 2013, you may have come upon a crowd of over 12,000 citizens watching a young boy dressed in a black costume foil a robbery. Entering into this situation would be very confusing without having seen a

similar situation previously or an understanding of the superhero genre to help you recognize this boy as a superhero.

Although not identically, situations recur and each *recurrence* of a situation is unique. Characteristics of a genre are taken up in different ways in these situations and yet they are still recognizable as characteristic of a genre. Batkid is not a character in comic books and he was only ever introduced as this young boy in San Francisco. Batkid saving the day was not simply an event that existed in isolation, it was a unique situation people engaged in because this genre of the superhero recurs in a variety of situations that individuals recognize.

The recurrence of situations develop typified characteristics of a genre. When situations recur there are actions which become typified in genres because of the similarity in the recurrence. These *typifications* of genre play into both recognition and expectations; individuals may recognize a situation by identifying actions in the situation that have become typified and subsequently expected in a genre. In many ways these expectations offer both practical implications for performing or participating in a situation and situational constraints for appropriate actions within a situation. In the case of Batkid, there was something about this boy that was still recognizable as a superhero for the city of San Francisco.

We recognize and make sense of a situation based on cues within the situation. This *situated cognition*, or situational sense making, is exemplified in the concept of situations as radically different and similar. Every situation we experience is unique in some way from a previous situation, but we use our knowledge of genres to make sense of the situation by tuning into similarities in genre. Making sense of a situation through



recognizing it as characteristic of a genre is precursory to participation in a situation or enacting a genre. That understanding allows you to engage with the typified and expected actions associated with the genre. Again, if you had been visiting San Francisco on November 15<sup>th</sup> 2013, and had come upon a crowd of over 12,000 citizens watching a young boy thwart a robbery, a knowledge of the superhero genre would allow you to make sense of the situation. Being able to identify the young boy as a superhero, would have afforded the ability to understand what to expect from Batkid and potentially how to participate in the situation.

*Social reproduction* is a key feature for participating in and understanding a genre; knowledge of genres offers the knowledge base for “how to participate in the actions of a community” (Miller, 1994). Through making sense of a situation, individuals learn how to participate in expected actions and subsequently participate in reproduction—either through upholding or altering typified actions. The agency involved in reproduction of genre in situations is important because the rhetorical perspective focuses on not only the experience, but also the reciprocity of users in relation to the genre and their participation in its reproduction. Users participate in the reproduction of genre to various extents based on context. Miller and Sheperd (2009) focus on the blog in order to explore tensions between “centrifugal forces of change and the centripetal tendencies of recurrence and typification, stability and cultural reproduction” (p. 266). Their choice of the blog was impacted by the ease of accessibility to production and reproduction of the genre. In contradistinction to genres like the blog, where user participation is integral to reproduction of the genre, the constrained nature of reproduction of the superhero genre offers a unique site for the exploration of tensions between both “forces of change and...

tendencies of recurrence and typification,” as well as “stability and cultural reproduction.”

In terms of exploring change and tendencies of recurrence and typification, the superhero genre offers a unique site due to the consistent, highly homogenized representations of characters within the genre (Brown, 2001; Darowski, 2014; Lepore, 2014; Madrid, 2009). Despite rampant criticism of the superhero genre from consumers, there has been little shift in the highly homogenized notion of what is a superhero, in terms of production. Although there has been some movement and inclusion of different in superheroes, since the first introduction of Superman, the notion of who constitutes a superhero has been centralized around white, heterosexual, traditionally masculine, males. If genres are flexible and changeable, then the consistent homogenization of the superhero genre may present a unique situation in which to examine genre change. The potential theoretical benefit to genre theory extends to the tension between stability and reproduction of genre similar to Miller and Sheperd’s (2009) examination of the blog. Their analysis of the blog offered a genre characterized by a relative ease of access for users to the production and reproduction of this genre. The superhero genre presents a site in direct opposition to this ease of access.

The superhero genre is not a genre characterized by ease of access to production and reproduction. Specifically, the superhero genre is highly regulated by an industry riddled with barriers to production. The individuals who have access to direct production of the superhero genre are far and few between, consisting of primarily editors, writers, artists, and inkers. The industry standards for ordering processes have been criticized for

being patriarchal and stifling to both consumers and newer series. Ashfield (2015) articulates the problematic nature of the highly structured comic distribution system that can hinder new titles before they are even launched by placing the financial risk of a book's success on small comic retailers, who are required to pre-order stock months in advance with no assurance that a title will sell. Therefore economically it is in their best interest to adhere to buying titles that have a proven track record and are safe. (p. 5-6)

Although some writers have attempted to find subversive means of promoting the publication of their newer titles, the distribution system places a heavy burden on the production of newer titles, due to their inherent lack of a "proven track record" (Ashfield, 2015). These institutional factors offer a unique site for exploring the notions of reproduction of genres from which users lack direct access to reproduction.

In order to engage how users experience the vernacular genre, the project utilizes rhetorical genre analysis to explore two guiding questions: (1) what rhetorical work does the superhero genre perform? And (2) what can we say about rhetorical genre analysis of vernacular genre.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Data Collection

Data collection occurred through a form of asynchronous interviewing; in this case an internet forum (Ayling & Mewse, 2009). Reddit served as the mode of data collection for this convenience sample. Reddit is a website designed as a news website and a social news networking platform, where users may contribute content or comments. In 2016, Reddit was the world's 25<sup>th</sup> most visited website and the 11<sup>th</sup> most visited website in the United States; due to this high traffic, Reddit was an ideal forum for gaining a variety of participants in a convenience sample (Similarweb). The website is organized by "sub-reddits" which are content specific topics on a wide variety of topics; these sub-reddits range from general topic areas (sports or current events) to narrower (specific video games or individual comic book issues). In order to contact potential participants through these sub-reddits, a post was cross-listed among 7 different sub-reddit forums including: superheroes, comics, comic books, Marvel comics, Marvel Studios and the Marvel Cinematic Universe, DC Comics, and DC Extended Universe. These sub-reddits were selected due to their relevance to the superhero genre and their high participant contribution.

The post itself contained 5 questions, listed in the Appendix, including an introduction that these responses were being collected for academic research. Rather than implementing a more exhaustive and specific set of questions, the post was

limited to 5 questions in order to minimize participant attrition. Responses, were collected from 16 participants. These participants engaged to a varying extent; their responses ranged in length from sentence fragments to paragraphs. Although this form of asynchronous interviewing placed some filters on the types of participants likely to be found (younger, educated, affluent individuals), asynchronous interviewing afforded the opportunity to collect experiences from a wider variety of participants (Tracey, 2013). Rather than focusing solely on one group of superhero genre users, utilizing Reddit forums as a mode of data collection opened the spectrum for potential participants beyond a single comics meeting group.

Certainly, synchronous interviewing would have allowed for more in depth, spontaneous discussions, avoided participant priming, as well as providing valuable non-verbal communication. However, for the purposes of this project, since synchronous interviewing was not possible, this asynchronous interviewing in some ways allowed for an upending of the traditional power relations in interviews; conversationally, it can subvert the traditional dominance of more vocal voices or remove some of the direct power distance between researcher and participant in the data collection setting (O'Connor, 2006). In the same vein, although participants could have read other's responses before responding themselves and potentially influenced one another's depictions of their understandings, this afforded the opportunity to create not only a dialogue, but additionally the time to thoroughly think through the questions to which they were asked to respond; offering them the time for participants to develop and organize their thoughts (Paulus, 2007).

### 3.2 Data Analysis

The project maintained a qualitative approach to data analysis informed by rhetorical genre theory. Although the methodology is qualitative, in the categorizing, coding, and examination of patterned responses, the research question centering the project was rhetorically engaged. Having conceptualized rhetoric as a kind of social action or as processes of meaning making (Miller, 1994), the project's goal was to engage with that meaning making in the superhero genre. The merger of this rhetorical focus with qualitative inquiry meshed quite fluidly. Rhetorical conceptualizations of genre focus on user experience, but in order to explore that experience of how individuals make meaning, the project necessitated descriptive texts and more in depth, thematic analysis; the rhetorical questions guiding the project called for techniques more common to qualitative inquiry.

The approach to data analysis was quite iterative, which Tracy (2012) has characterized as lying in fluctuation between emergent readings of data and reflection on existing theory (p. 184). A theoretical thematic approach was used when coding the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data" (p. 6). Theoretical thematic analysis involves examining themes across data with a theoretical framework guiding the examination of a particular aspect of data; alternatively, inductive thematic analysis is linked to the data, in that the analysis remains removed from theoretical guidance and is comparatively more "data driven" and may echo similarities to grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12). As the five questions in the post were designed to focus on the social components of genre, the texts were coded using theoretical thematic analysis. This

project adopted the notion of a theme forwarded by Braun and Clarke as capturing “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 10). With this conceptualization of “theme” in mind, clarifying what counts as a theme, for the purposes of coding, was important.

Throughout, themes were coded based on their recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Recurrence entails a repetition of similar “threads of meaning” throughout a text or data set, even if the wording is dissimilar (p. 275). Repetition, although alike, entails the specific “repeated use of the same wording” (p. 275). Forcefulness, for the purposes of an interview, “refers to vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances...” or other types of focusing of attention (p. 276). In order to maintain fidelity to the texts, examples of emergent themes were highlighted along with an emphasis on deviant cases.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Following the goal of the project, offering an understanding of the superhero genre that engages how individuals socially experience the genre, I identified three themes through this analysis of the vernacular genre. I address each of the themes in individual sections in order to maintain clarity for the discussions. However, the themes are interconnected and the discussions intermingle amongst the themes to provide a richer, more complete depiction.

### 4.1 Murkiness of Typifications in Vernacular Genres

When prompted for the requisite features of the superhero genre, participants discussed the typifications by which they perceived the genre in a variety of ways. Most of the participants highlighted (1) a requisite *super-ness* and working for a *greater good* as indicative of the superhero genre; still, some identified (2) terminology as key for understanding the genre, whereas others discussed (3) brands as their mode of recognition. These three patterns in participant responses point to the fluidity and complexity in terms of situated cognition.

#### 4.1.1 Super-ness and Goodness

What makes genres recognizable and subsequently allows individuals to make use of them are the recurrent typifications individuals expect based on their previous experiences. The most common pattern in participant discussions of recognizing the



superhero genre was the duality participants identified between super-ness and the greater good.

One participant wrote that a character could be considered a superhero and constitutive of the superhero genre based on

2 things: being super, and being a hero. Being super is not simply biological powers, but mechanical things that enhance the hero, or training to surpass any ordinary human can make them super... Being a hero is doing the right thing, even when the going is tough. Jessica Jones may do many things that some consider wrong, but she defends the girl wrongfully accused and tries to help her.

According to this participant, a superhero must be both super and do the right thing. The notion of surpassing the ordinary makes sense when talking about a superhero and the participant emphasized the diverse ways in which characters could surpass the ordinary: biologically, through mechanical enhancements, or training. The super-ness need not be achieved simply by a biological change or enhancement, but perhaps through actions taken to surpass what “any ordinary human” can do. This achievement of attaining excellence and setting oneself apart from the ordinary, was present in many participant discussions.

Another participant discussed this super-ness or exceptionalism through a comparison to mythology.

I see superheroes as equivalents to classical heroes in the ancient sense. That is, they exist in a world roughly like our own, stand apart from humanity but are still forced to function as part of it, still have to live under the same rules as the rest of

us, and often act as paragons and aspirational goals for the best possible humans we can be.

This participant emphasizes the comparative nature of super-ness. Again, the superhero genre, must exist in a world similar to our own, while still “stand[ing] apart.” The notion of super-ness within this genre seems to be achieved through contradistinction of heroic and ordinary. By defining super-ness through opposition, this allows characters to “act as paragons... for the best humans” can be. Due to the contrast against the ordinary or mundane, this simultaneously designates characters as super and establishes a moral imperative or importance of a “greater good” in order to signify the genre.

However, the notion of super-ness is not clear-cut for every participant. Although most participants emphasized the importance of this contradistinction in the superhero genre, one participant stated that they would “take to be a series with a protagonist/antagonist with augmented/heightened abilities and [they] recognize it by these protagonists and antagonists creating or already having an alternate persona that is motivated by their ideals.” In this case, a character must have powers, but not necessarily through contrast to ordinary people. Their powers must be “heightened” in some way, but the bar against which their excellence must be measured is not clear or specifically distinguished. For this particular denotation of super-ness, discussion seems to be more open-ended in terms of what constitutes the nature of super-ness, but regardless of how each participant recognizes super-ness, each participant has emphasized that in any example of a superhero genre, there must be an inherent or innate, guiding goodness.

In the previous example, the participant wrote that they must be “motivated by their ideals,” indicating that a text focusing on super-ness or an individual with

“heightened abilities” would not necessarily be recognizable or indicative of the superhero genre. Rather, the text would need both elements of super-ness as well as a kind of moral compass motivating their actions. One participant explained this as

going strictly with the word, I feel as if someone needs to have superpowers in order to be a superhero. However, if they don't have some sort of "good" personality trait or behavior, then they likely qualify for a supervillain or an anti-hero.

Previously mentioned participants had spoken about the importance of this moral compass by mentioning “being a hero is doing the right thing, even when the going is tough,” or that heroes “act as paragons and aspirational goals for the best” humans can be. Each of these individuals voiced the importance of the super-ness being tempered through “doing the right thing” in some way. For these participants there seemed to be an inextricable duality in the superhero genre between doing what is right and having superpowers; not to say that everyone with superpowers has to be moral, but the superheroes themselves must. They must also be diametrically opposed to those who, perhaps are super, but do not do the right thing. As one participant voiced,

In the superhero genre, you have your archetypal hero and villain. The hero is always an entity of some sort against the supervillain [who] can be either another entity or a concept, such as crime, indecency, injustice, etc

The superhero genre is again defined through opposition. In order for a text to be recognizable as the superhero genre, there must be a superhero fighting, either for some ideal or concept, in this example civility, decency, justice, etc.; or against a character with superpowers who does not fight for what is right. Most of the discussions surrounding

recognizing the superhero genre, emphasize the superhero must use their powers in order to fight for something (whether that be mentioned as doing what is right, or for the greater good). However, this participant identifies that superheroes are recognizable when they fight against something, as well. This distinction, seems important because it reiterates the complexity of the genre and that super-ness of a character cannot be enough to demarcate a superhero, but rather the character must have some guiding goodness or they must fight against the supervillain who does not.

#### 4.1.2 Shared Meanings

Although most every participant discussed recognition of the genre in terms of super-ness and goodness there were two less prevailing themes which emerged as well: focus on shared meanings of terminology, and brand recognition. Beginning with the former, one participant discussed the importance of communal understandings of terminology when recognizing the genre. Focusing on the fluidity of genres, this participant wrote

Way I see it, it's an issue of terminology. Speculative fiction is when we tell stories in worlds that don't quite work like our own. In Fantasy Fiction we call these differences magic, or some variation on that concept. In Science Fiction we call these differences science, or some variation on that concept. In Superhero Fiction we call these differences superpowers, or some variation on that concept. Beyond that there's no real difference.

Although the participant called into question the distinctions between genres, noting the similarity between fantasy, science fiction, and superhero genres, they simultaneously articulated the importance of communal understandings of genre conventions. Under the

umbrella of speculative fiction, the participant noted distinctions between each genre were delineated based on what the differences are called or understood to be.

They continued “each genre is of course shaped by the common conception of what magic/science/superpowers are but ultimately the author's pretty much got free reign to decide what that all means.” From this discussion, it is clear that in spite of potential similarities between genres, there are distinctions which render them recognizable by users; whether these are simply terminological or typified elements, the individuals must have a frame of reference from which they are able to distinguish between the similarities. The “common conception” or communal understanding of terminology, like magic or superpowers, may be a piece of what makes the superhero genre recognizable for this participant. Although the participant spoke about the terminology being distinct markers of the genre, the terms themselves seem to be less important to them than the shared understandings about the genre based in experience.

That communal understanding accessed by individuals seems to be represented in the comment about the “author” having free reign. In order for the author to be able to write in fantasy versus science fiction or superhero genres, the author must understand typifications in the chosen genre based on their past experiences. In recognizing the superhero genre, the communal understandings of superpowers versus magic or science seems to be key for this participant, similarly as it was for others. This variety within communal understandings points to the importance of genre fluidity. The generic experiences shaping an author’s understanding of the superhero may not reflect much of the experiences of users. However, this notion of author having “free reign” extends only so far; users must still be able to recognize a genre and these typifications through their

own experiences with the genre. Authorial experiences and intention may have more direct impact into the reproduction of texts than an average user, but in the same vein, must tap into similar typifications.

#### 4.1.3 Brand Recognition

Another less common theme, compared to the more prevalent discussions of recognizing the superhero genre was recognition through brand. The participant who discussed brand as a mode of genre recognition stated that the “superhero genre to me is a show/movie focusing anyone or anything with extraordinary powers. I guess I mostly recognize the genre by seeing the Marvel/DC logo or seeing characters I recognize.” This participant mentioned the “extraordinary” nature of characters, acknowledging that they view super-ness, in some form, as important. However, the participant said that the primary way they recognize a situation as the superhero genre, is through “seeing the Marvel/DC logo or a character [they] recognize.” In the same way comic books are often synonymized with the superhero genre, this participant recognizes the superhero genre through a synonymization of the genre with the main brands in comics, Marvel and DC.

In discussions of recognition, participants talk about generic expectations in systematic, but somewhat varying ways—super-ness and goodness, terminology, or brand identification. Despite this variety, a pattern that remained consistent throughout was the notion of the “greater good” being integral to the superhero genre. Participants used similar phrasing and word choices to discuss the notion: greater good, doing what is right, motivated by ideals. Through this we can see the fixedly fluid understanding of terminological typifications; although each participant focused on the same idea of a greater good, they did speak about the idea in different ways.

In terms of recognition, there is a fluidity and complexity when discussing this vernacular genre through a rhetorical lens. Even when participants discussed the genre as being characterized by a brand or terminology, the fixed constant in fluid discussions came back to this civic focus on the greater good. The rhetorical experience of users, how they discuss making sense of the genre, is continually framed through their expectation on a civic focused greater good. It is to that very use of the genre which the next theme turns.

#### 4.2 Civic Use Value

When recognizing a genre, there are expectations that come along with the genre that shape understanding. In the case of the superhero genre, each participant communicated the expectation of a civic focus to the genre. To revisit a previous comment, one participant mentioned that they felt someone needs to have superpowers in order to be a superhero, but “if they don't have some sort of ‘good’ personality trait or behavior, then they likely qualify for a supervillain or an anti-hero.” This participant states that when they recognize the superhero genre there is a clear expectation that superheroes are motivated to do good. This generic expectation seems to indicate a civicminded orientation or understanding of the genre.

The focus on a civic goal or working towards a greater good is an expectation that shapes how users see value and purpose in the genre. As one participant remarked, a superhero “has to be a symbol OF something... Superman is a symbol of universal humanity and the noble use of power, Zorro is a symbol of the search for justice and righteousness on the part of all good men.” Superhero texts reach a communal understanding of what is right through the actions of the heroes, but according to this

participant, their symbolic function does more. The participant continued “likewise, a superhero CHOOSES, often with personal sacrifice being a result, the life they do. They go out of their way to make the world a better place and encourage others to do the same.” These texts in many ways speak to what is right or what will “make the world a better place” among the shared understandings of users. Despite the contextual differences in what the character stands for specifically or faces, that contextual fluidity fosters a community understanding of this abstract notion of a “better place,” in users.

One important facet participants continually identify is that “they exist in a world roughly like our own.” This similarity to the real world allows the genre to maintain its civic focus and draw clear parallels to the real world. Another participant commented that they “think the cultural importance of superheroes relies on social norms or counter cultures. You can use superheroes to parallel these events and I think that's how they get a lot of significance to some people by making those connections.” This participant discusses the challenge or reification that the superhero genre contributes to their experiences. By situating the texts through “social norms or counter cultures” the superhero genre can be seen as a commentary on real, current, or past events. Another participant discussed just such an experience with the impact of texts and their purpose within their given context;

In some cases they [superhero texts] are references to some especial things like: Captain America, is a character that was made practically in WW2 to US propaganda of good US soldier beating the evil germans, but nowadays we just see them as cool/badass dudes that are amazingly awesome. T'challa as well, created for representation of black people.



Similarly to Captain America's creation as propaganda during WWII, in order to advocate for United States' involvement, and T'Challa's inauguration as commentary on his secret identity's name, the Black Panther, the superhero genre offers the opportunity for users to engage with real events and this civic focus of the genre.

A participant focused on the importance of the superhero genre on current events, saying that some individuals:

see them as exaggerated analogies for current problems, but a lot of people seem to look for them to draw upon the strength of the fictional heroes as they go about their daily lives

This individual identified the plurality of reasons the superhero genre might be useful to individuals, specifically they focused on the importance of making sense of "current problems" and as aspirational figures to help individuals. The focus here was on the benefits to the community, the user group. A different participant mirrored this discussion and mentioned that a

lot of superheroes fight for what they believe is right and a lot of those beliefs tend to reflect on their respective cultures. They're also important because a lot of people look up to them not only in the fictitious world but in the real world as well.

The superhero genre serves a function to the community of users and that function revolves around their expectation that the superhero genre is entangled with a civic focus. In this case, superheroes are mentioned as fighting for what they believe is right and the user emphasizes the contextual nature of those beliefs. Participants may have differing understandings of what "right" is based on their context, but aiding in users making sense

of that fluidity is a function of the genre. One participant commented that although “the movies are huge right now, outside of nerd-circles and children's animations, I wouldn't say they're very culturally important right now.” Again, this comment reiterates the primary importance of these texts is for the community of users; reiterating the importance of community around this text as a meaning making endeavor and the texts articulating the tensions seen in the community.

The expectation of participants on this civic focus of the genre meant that participants oriented their discussions of purpose and value around this expectation. They articulated that the value the superhero genre lay in how it shaped their understandings and aided in making sense of their world, current events, and fostering a communal understanding amongst users.

#### 4.3 Participation in the Wake of Limited Participation

A key component of any discussion surrounding rhetorical understandings of genre is the engagement of users in the social reproduction of the genre. Participants discussed two primary ways in which they engaged in social reproduction of the superhero genre: consumption and interpretation. When participants discussed how they were introduced to the superhero genre and how they continue that participation, many said they were introduced through television shows or movies. One participant said they watch the

Spiderman cartoon from the 90s... It stuck since then. Comic books were too intimidating to [them] until just this year... but after reading the web serial “Worm” [their] love for everything superhero grew tenfold and [they] dove in anywhere [they] could with comics.

Many participants echoed the same sentiment that their participation spans a variety of mediums. Another participant discussed how they became engaged with the superhero genre when

the movies/shows released when [they] was young: being 19, [they] w[ere] privy to several different superhero movies coming from several different fronts, whether [they] w[ere] going to the movies with family or watching them on VHS. Furthermore, the small screen slowly became more and more dominated by animated superhero shows. It seems like the times are keeping up with [them], because as the superhero genre grows larger, more mature content becomes available, [they] can continue to feed [their] desire for superhero stories.

Participants identified consumption, whether through reading or viewing, as the primary way in which they engage with the superhero genre. Almost epitomizing this notion of consumption, one participant noted people engage with the superhero genre through “merchandise! Can’t forget about that.” Consumption, in its varieties, seems to be the way in which participants access the superhero genre, however, in terms of reciprocity or their ability of participate in reproduction of the genre, participants touched on the importance of interpretation of the genre.

Reciprocity or participation in social reproduction seems limited to consumption and interpretation in these discussions. Participants are primarily engaged in what they can partake in; since not everyone can be an editor, writer, or illustrator, they watch TV shows, read, or consume this media to make sense of their world through the civic lens of the genre. The genre through a “shared” understanding of community value, but also on an individual level.

## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Contributions

The theoretical purpose of this study was to explore the potential implications of rhetorical genre analysis application in the context of vernacular genres, specifically the superhero genre. Since a rhetorical perspective focuses on the experience and reciprocity in terms of participation of users in relation to the genre (Miller, 1994). I would like to reconsider two guiding questions. What rhetorical work does the superhero genre perform? And what can we say about rhetorical genre analysis of vernacular genres?

Conceptualizing rhetorical work as the work a genre does in allowing individuals to process and make meaning, the rhetorical work of the superhero genre centers around the generic expectation of civic-mindedness. The recurrence of “civic-minded” discussions were plentiful, ranging in phrasing from expressing the importance of “ideals” as motivation to working to make the world a “better place.” The expectation of a civic focus represents the stability of the genre among the plethora of fluid expectations. Individuals discussed typifications about defining the genre through opposition to the ordinary, setting a standard of excellence, importance of shared communal meaning, and brands as ways by which they recognize the genre. Despite this fluidity in recognition, the expectations and purpose they pointed to consistently were the communal understanding of the greater good.

The relationship between the contextual nature of the vernacular genre and its recognition can best be characterized by fixedness and ephemerality; the fixed point being the expectation of civic-mindedness twinned with the ephemeral complexity of individual experiences with the genre. The individual experiences are contextual and change, in some ways, the way the genre is understood. Miller and Shephard (2009) explain how the variety of individual experiences challenge the very notion of generic stability, or what makes “genre generic;” in their discussion, they describe this challenge as the tension between “centrifugal forces of change and the centripetal tendencies of recurrence and typification, stability and cultural reproduction” (p. 264, p. 266, p. 272). In much the same way, the individual experiences of users characterize their contextual understandings of the superhero genre, making recognition through expectation and purpose important. That purpose, or the rhetorical work done by the genre seems to, in many ways, serve as the fixed point of genre despite the “forces of change.” In their article, Miller and Shephard (2004) discuss the rhetorical work of the blog as “self-disclosure: self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control” (p. 14). Contrasting to the work of self-disclosure, the work of the superhero genre is engaged with civic oriented meaning making: fostering communal understanding through individual focus. The stability of the genre lies in this purpose, but individuals emphasized the importance of genre fluidity in allowing completion of this rhetorical work.

Genre fluidity was key in discussions of recognition. Users emphasized the previously mentioned three main ways of recognizing the genre: super-ness and goodness, shared meanings and brand recognition. Participants identified being super and

being “good” or moral as key for recognition of the genre, which seems to mirror, while breaking from, Coogan’s (2013) iteration of recognition. Coogan discusses the conventions of “mission, powers, and identity,” as “establish[ing] the core of the genre” (p. 7). Participants certainly discuss the importance of powers, the super-ness of characters was salient and tempered by, as Coogan refers to it, their mission. The vital guiding role goodness plays in the superhero genre was identified by one participant who noted if superheroes “don’t have some sort of ‘good’ personality trait or behavior, then they likely qualify for a supervillain.” Coogan (2013) discusses the same mission as needing to be in keeping with the professed mores of society. The point at which similarities begin to diverge, emerges from Coogan’s discussion of identity, which was not pervasive in participant discussions. This absence of focus on a secret identity may be due to the way in which participants view the purpose of the superhero genre. If participants view the purpose or rhetorical work of the genre to be centered around civic focused meaning making, then recognition as well as expectations of the genre would make sense to focus on the duality of super-ness and goodness rather than focusing on the notion of identity as a recurrent typification.

The rhetorical analysis of this vernacular genre can elucidate some of the complexities literary approaches to genre leave absent by examining user experiences. User experiences emphasized the civic focus of the genre being functions because the superhero genre exists in a world “not unlike” or “roughly like our own.” The similarities in context allows clear parallels to be drawn by users, which parallels Mills’ (2014) discussion of the turn to “relatability” in superhero comics. Rather than focusing on unrealistic godlike figures, Mills argues that in the 1960s there was a turn to relatable

characters in the superhero genre; characters who has to sew their own costumes, interpersonal conflicts among team members, characters battling issues like alcoholism. This seems to match up with participants who, similarly, spoke about the salient nature of similarity in the superhero genre to our world, in order to make sense of their own experiences.

The importance of similarity extends to the importance of genre fluidity and contextuality. Participant examples of Captain America's development in World War II as propaganda to encourage United States' entry and the Black Panther's creation "for the representation of black people," epitomize how important context is in vernacular genres. These descriptions speak to the fact that a generic text is a product of a specific time and place, but it is also "formed in interaction with a kairos" (Miller & Shephard, 2004). Participants speak about the importance of recognizing the genre in a variety of contexts, a variety of moments through a shared construction of the genre. The fluidity in the social construction of genre is discussed by participants as important, especially when they speak about shared meanings. When one participant mentioned that the superhero genre is merely an "issue of terminology," they compared differences between the world and science fiction, the world and fantasy, and the world and superheroes, to be primarily about a distinction in what we call those differences. Despite the supposed triviality of these difference in terminology, the terminology/what we call the differences, remain distinguishable; they remain so, because of the shared understandings of the community of users. As users organize community around these understandings, these texts, the texts themselves reflect a purpose or use of the community.

Our discussion thus far has yet to engage with a central concern of rhetorical genre analysis, that of reciprocity. If the texts/genre reflect a purpose to the community, then what reciprocity does the community, do users, have in this relationship? In other words, how do users participate in the social reproduction of the genre—how do their experiences contribute to communal understanding? Participants primarily identified their acts of participation through terms of consumption and interpretation. The notion of interpreting the superhero genre as an act of participation, seems to align with the civic-minded focus of the genre; aiding individuals in making sense of their world through their individual interpretations.

Consumption, however, could present a unique challenge to conceptualization of genre as social action. Participants talked about consumption of the superhero genre primarily through viewing television series, movies, or reading comic books. Viewing consumption as the primary mode of participation in the genre, for some participants, presents an interesting question for this genre. Since rhetorical genre analysis is concerned with the rhetorical experience of users and the agency users have in reproducing the genre, users commenting on consumption as their primary method of participation raises questions as to what extent users maintain or can enact reciprocity in the superhero genre. Undoubtedly, users participate in the reproduction of genres to varying extents based on context, Miller and Shephard's research on the blog explicating a more user driven genre—where users have more direct access to the means of genre production—in comparison to the superhero genre (2004, 2009). Ashfield's (2015) discussion surrounding the stiflingly structure nature of the comics distribution system



signifies only a small piece of that larger picture, but underscores potential reasons for which users would end up participating through consumption.

It would make sense that users would select the methods by which to participate in the genre that are most accessible, in this case, primarily watching, viewing, or reading the superhero genre. In this vernacular genre, users have little access to modes of production—most users are not editors, writers, designers, or illustrators. However, individuals continually described ways in which they consume the genre; their discussions never indicated reciprocity with the genre—they participated, consumed, and watched without being able to bring their experiences to the genre directly and engage in the social reproduction of the texts, movies, animated series, comic books. One participant represented this idea by noting “I guess I mostly recognize the genre by seeing the Marvel/DC logo or seeing characters I recognize.”

As much as Marvel and DC would no doubt love to hear that their brand identity is synonymous with recognizing this genre, the implications of this commentary represent a moment rather unique to vernacular genres. Marvel and DC are the two main producers of the superhero genre to the point that their brands are synonymous with the genre itself; these are the two companies that create the majority of widely available commercial texts (television series, movies, video games, comic books) from which individuals experience and interact with the superhero genre. These circumstances are somewhat unique to vernacular genre, since access to creation and participation of more functional genres, to which more scholarly attention in the rhetorical genre tradition has been paid—like the memo or blog (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992; Miller & Sheperd, 2009)—necessitate more reciprocity because users recreate those genres in a more direct way. This application to

vernacular genres runs somewhat counter intuitively to Miller and Shepherd's (2004) discussion of the "dynamic, evolutionary nature of genres," since the structured nature of this genre affords little reciprocity in terms of generic evolution (p. 2). There seems to be little in participant discussions about reciprocity with this genre, likely due to the barriers to user participation in modes of production.

The rhetorical experiences of users in the superhero genre seems to be mediated by the structured nature of production. This community of users is built around these texts and the texts provide a rhetorical function for the users, yet participants discuss little reciprocity in the genre. If there is little reciprocity, to what extent are the texts articulating the goals/values of this broader community? In this case, Schryer's (2002) note that genres are ideological because they always reflect the social location and time of individuals becomes particularly poignant (p. 84; 95). This would especially call into question the extent to which these texts may express or resonate the social experiences of groups marginalized in and by the genre historically—the experiences of women or African Americans for example.

In terms of applicability of rhetorical genre analysis to vernacular genres, this notion offers an important consideration. Certainly, in comparison to literary approaches, rhetorical genre analysis allows for more complex experiential understandings of genres and examination of the purpose genres serves—mainly due to their differing conceptualizations of genre. Users continually voiced the importance fluidity played in terms of their social understanding of the genre. While considering how this project contributes to the understanding of how we construct and think about genre, I continued to return to the potential prospect utilizing rhetorical approaches for vernacular genres

may have in terms of engaging with what reciprocity entails. For rhetorical analysis of vernacular genres, interrogation of the ways in which modes of production influence reciprocity may offer insights into the dynamic impact reciprocity has regarding the expectations and rhetorical work of genres. In the case of the superhero genre, the rhetorical work of the genre is engaged in “civicminded” meaning making. When thinking about the relationship between work a vernacular genre performs for users more broadly, and the mode of production and access of users, rhetorical genre analysis may need to more carefully take into consideration the impact of modes of reproduction.

## 5.2 Limitations

Although the project does not endeavor to present generalizable discussions, but rather an exploration, this project certainly has limitations worthy of consideration. The primary limitations lie in the data collection process. The public nature of Reddit presents some problematic implications in terms of participant’s responses due to the nature of this mediated interview (Tracy, 2013). Since each participant response was posted on the sub-reddit, any of the subsequent participants could have read the earlier messages. In part, this process afforded the opportunity to create a form of dialogue between participants (Paulus, 2007). In some ways this mirrors the potential for discussions in a focus group, with participants engaging one another’s thoughts and iterating their opinions through that discussion. Although, this could have primed later participants potentially influencing one another’s depictions of their understandings, this potential participant priming was likely mitigated, to a degree, due to the plurality of sub-reddits to which the post was submitted. The danger of participant priming would be that the earlier discussions could shape later participants, thereby changing the ways in which

participants discuss their experiences and potentially inhibiting the emergence of diverse experience.

Additionally, there were only 16 participant responses in the study, where originally the goal was 30 to 50 participant responses. The convenience sample, undoubtedly represents the experiences of a small sample of individuals, but the goal of the project has been to provide a new perspective on rhetorical genre analysis applications in vernacular genres. One key benefit of utilizing Reddit was to enable the potential collection of responses from a widely diverse participant pool; Reddit could potentially reach a far more diverse than focusing on a specific group would likely allow. Simultaneously, the collection of data from specific sub-reddits does present challenges in terms of the narrow potential pool of participants. Participants had to be both well-versed and interested enough in Reddit to be on the site, familiar enough with how to navigate Reddit, and interested in the superhero genre to find this project's post. Although the latter is the main parameter for participation, the formers present important considerations in terms of limitations of the project. This form of asynchronous interview does place some filters on the types of participants likely to be found, inherently biasing the participant pool. Specifically, mediated interviews necessitate a certain amount of technological savvy and "because young, educated, and affluent people tend to have more access to technology than older, less educated, or poorer individuals, mediated interviews may skew the study's sample or leave out important information" (Tracy, 2013). And though the goal of the project was never to retrieve generalizable result, but rather to examine a vernacular genre with a rhetorical genre lens, focusing on users' social

experience, any further investigations should likely endeavor to engage with more specificity, their participant pool.

### 5.3 Future Directions

Further research conducted in this area should consider two primary areas for improved investigation: methodological considerations and theoretical considerations. Methodologically, gaining additional data through synchronous methods of interviewing would be valuable. Traditionally, synchronous interviews would provide a host of rich detail from non-verbal communication; in addition, the fluidity of synchronous interviewing would offer the opportunity to utilize a lengthy agenda of questions as well as engage with potentially important details through probing questions (Patton, 2002). The fluidity of this approach to interviewing could yield a more engaged set of responses through spontaneous probing questions, for which asynchronous interviewing is ill equipped.

Theoretically, researchers should consider the rhetorical significance modes of production play in user experience of vernacular genre; paying special attention to impacts modes of production have on the experiences of individuals in vernacular genres. Additionally, an examination of the modes of production may reveal unique ways in which communities take up the reproduction and participation of vernacular genres. Some questions to interrogate might be: How does it mediate/impose expectations onto recurrent texts, typifications, situations? How do those expectations—mediated in some ways by circumstances of production—impact/shape purpose/use value of genres? What does reciprocity look like in somewhat stable vernacular genres?

Additionally, one way by which researchers could address these very questions would be through engaging with populations who traditionally have less access to the modes of reproduction by which the superhero genre has developed, would present a unique opportunity for exploring the social experiences and use of this vernacular genre. Without having conducted synchronous interviewing, discerning the demographic layout of this projects' convenience sample is not possible, but future research could explore a specific group traditionally marginalized from these discussions—women, African Americans, in order to look at forms of critique within this genre—examining critique as a potential form of participation in social reproduction of the genre.

As a final theoretical direction, a consideration of superhero texts, and users of those texts, produced outside of the primary Marvel/DC production structure could explicate how users go about participating in social reproduction of vernacular genres. Potentially examination of online web comics could be a useful sight for this type of inquiry surrounding potentially subversive of the modes of production limiting direct reciprocal access to the superhero genre.

#### 5.4 Conclusion

The primary purpose of the project is to offer an exploration into the rhetorical experience of the superhero genre, which is bound up in users' experiences. In order to engage this purpose, the two guiding questions of the project asked: (1) what rhetorical work does the superhero genre perform? And (2) what can we say about rhetorical genre analysis of vernacular genres?

In terms of theoretical contributions to rhetorical genre analysis, this project presents additional considerations for conceptualizing vernacular genre from a rhetorical

perspective. Specifically, rhetorical genre analysis should take into account the ways in which modes of reproduction of vernacular genres impact the rhetorical work of these genres as well as expectations of user experiences.

Additionally, the project offers theoretical contributions to conceptualizations of the superhero genre, and presents the ways in which rhetorical genre analysis offers scholars the ability to engage experiential understandings of vernacular genres like the superhero genre. This exploration of experiential knowledge of genre supplements the literary discussions of genre and allows researchers to explore the kind of work genres perform—in the case of the superhero genre, the rhetorical work is the civic-minded meaning making. In practice, understanding the rhetorical work of the genre provides insights into the motivations behind the organization and actions of the community engaged with these texts; for example, if we return to the discussion of Batkid, how might understanding the civic focused nature of the superhero genre, impact the understanding of why users chose to participate?

Although participants primarily discussed consumption as their mode of participation in the genre, Batkid serves as an illustrative moment in which understanding the motivations of the community engaging around the superhero genre also allows for interpretation into the purpose of social generic enactments. Considering the potential influence that the restrictive modes of reproduction may play in the rhetorical work of the genre could allow for insight into why individuals elected to participate in the demonstration of Batkid; more broadly, considering modes of reproduction may offer greater insight into the ways in which community experiences of genre are constructed and constrained, thereby impacting genre's potential for both stability and change. This

consideration of modes of production impacting community experiences of genre would be particularly illustrative in regards to specific minority communities whom traditionally have been excluded from inclusion in both the texts and production of this vernacular genre.



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## APPENDIX

## APPENDIX

Below is the text of the Reddit post including the description and instructions to participants.

I am a researcher interested in the superhero genre. I am particularly focused on user experiences with the genre and am looking for participants to offer some perspective on how they understand the genre. Please take the time to respond to the following questions and add any additional thoughts that you have.

- 1) How did you become interested in superheroes?
- 2) What is the superhero genre? How do you recognize the superhero genre?
- 3) In what ways can a character be a superhero?
- 4) How are superheroes culturally important? Why are they important?
- 5) Please offer any additional thoughts you have regarding the superhero genre.